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Breaking the Cycle of Shame: Understanding and Exploring Solutions to Fitness Shaming

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Apply It!

By reading this article, health and exercise professionals will:

- Learn about the prevalence and effects of fitness shaming.
- Recognize the cycle of shame that inhibits clients from meeting their fitness goals.
- Identify actionable suggestions for exercise professionals to help combat shaming.

Key words: Shame, Anxiety, Community, General Population, Fitness

INTRODUCTION

As exercise professionals, our overarching goal is to positively influence people: their physical health, self-image (and feelings about themselves), and overall well-being. We operate with deep care for the craft of teaching others how to move their bodies in nourishing ways. However, some of our words and actions may inadvertently have the opposite effect on our clients by bringing about "fitness shame," which we define as feelings of inadequacies, powerlessness, or embarrassment around fitness. Therefore, as exercise professionals, we must ask ourselves: Are we "fitness shaming" our clients? And if so, what can we do differently?

Fitness is not defined by a set of movements (like a specific exercise), but rather, as a holistic "set of attributes that people have or achieve" related to "vigor, alertness, fatigue, and enjoyment" with daily activities (1). Research on the relationship between self-conscious emotions and fitness is complex. Although the experiences of guilt and shame are deeply intertwined, one key distinction is that guilt describes regret for an individual action or behavior, while the emotion of shame, brought on both by external and internal influences, is "attributed to a global flaw of the self" (2,3). Although both guilt and shame are pervasively used as tools in the fitness world, guilt often leads to action, whereas shame leads to isolation and avoidance. In a study investigating the relationship between weight-related coping, guilt, and shame, Conradt et al. (2008) confirmed that while "weight-related guilt might have a positive effect on the employment of more active coping strategies [such as diet and exercise changes]," "weight-related shame seems to be related to a decrease in problem-focused coping" (4). In other words, guilt may lead to action, whereas shame is often related to retreating. Our research builds on existing literature by offering a practical framework to serve as a reference for exercise professionals to combat shame as they work with clients.

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In an effort to highlight the prevalence of fitness shaming and offer grounded, tangible solutions to this complex phenomenon, we conducted surveys among 2,003 American adults and 251 certified exercise professionals (CEPs) (see sidebar for details). Findings revealed that fitness shaming is not an isolated event. Among the general population, one in five (20%) American adults report having experienced feelings of inadequacies, powerlessness, or embarrassment around fitness, and virtually all reported that the shaming had a lasting effect on them, with effects ranging from lowered self-esteem to body dysmorphic disorder. Alarmingly, one in four (24%) American adults who experienced fitness shaming reported that this led them to quit exercising, either in the long term or the short term. Among certified exercise professionals, the proportion reporting that they have experienced fitness shaming is even higher, at 28%. Survey data indicate that exercise professionals who have been shamed seem to go down one of two paths: either being extremely harsh with their clients or leaning into being more understanding and empathetic with them.

Based on the results of this survey and a series of in-depth interviews with both members of the general public and CEPs, we have developed what we are calling the "cycle of shame"—an ongoing chain of messaging and action that paralyzes and isolates people (Figure 1). It is our hope that this cycle of shame will be a tactile resource that serves as a jumping-off point for engaging in conversations around shame with clients. Although dismantling shame is complex, we believe that by empathizing with the lived experiences of fitness shaming, exercise professionals, particularly those who have experienced it themselves, hold a unique opportunity to be "antishame" advocates. By naming each phase of this cycle, we start to pinpoint the causes and consequences of the shame that surrounds us all, ultimately allowing exercise professionals to begin derailing this cycle through accessibility, communication, and collaboration.

Figure 1. The Cycle of Shame. A graphical representation of the stages of The Cycle of Shame: I hear simple messages; I think meeting my fitness goals should be simple; I'm doing what I'm told, and find it's NOT simple; I don't meet my goals; I feel like a failure and turn inward; I am ashamed of myself, and society is ashamed of me; I'm desperate for an easy solution.

The Cycle of Shame
I hear simple messages
I think meeting my fitness goals should be simple
I'm doing what I'm told, and find it's NOT simple
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Sidebar: Study Results

We conducted a 20-minute online quantitative survey in the fall of 2022 with a nationally representative sample of 2,003 American adults and 251 CEPs, including both certified personal trainers (CPTs) and registered yoga teachers (RYTs). The sample for this survey was purchased through Prodege, a leading global market research sample provider (https://www.prodege.com/). The survey was posted on Prodege's online dashboard and recruited using the following panels: Swagbucks, MyPoints, InboxDollars, and Upromise. Prodege utilizes an incentive program where members earn and accumulate points for their participation in surveys. Respondents aged 18+ were selected through stratified quota sampling to ensure the sample was representative of the US population for location, age, race, ethnicity, gender, and income. The survey was fielded from September 30 to October 9, 2022. Our research team also recruited seven adults and seven CEPs nationwide for 45-minute in-depth interviews via Zoom to enrich our findings with vibrant narrative experiences. Interview respondents were recruited using the panel services of HubUX, a research operation platform. HubUX recruited participants to take the screener via social media advertisements and direct messaging. Because shame is profoundly personal, we wanted to hear directly from people themselves what shame looks and feels like in their everyday lives. Their stories, and the findings from our study, can be found throughout this article.

Although dismantling shame is complex, we believe that by empathizing with the lived experiences of fitness shaming, exercise professionals, particularly those who have experienced it themselves, hold a unique opportunity to be "antishame" advocates.

THE PROBLEM: A CYCLE OF SHAME

Fitness shaming is prevalent among US adults, with one in five (20%) reporting having experienced it and 92% of those reporting at least one lasting effect. Further, adults who have experienced fitness shaming are significantly more likely than those who have not to report negative feelings around fitness and self-image, as well as tendencies toward isolation. For example, 65% of those who have experienced fitness shaming agree that "When I can't manage to exercise, I feel guilty," compared to just 48% of those who have not experienced fitness shaming. People who have been shamed are significantly more likely than those who have not been to agree that "I feel pressured by society to strive for certain physical

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attributes (*i.e.*, thinner, more muscular)" (59% vs. 29%). And more than half (56%) of those who have experienced fitness shaming agree that "If it were possible to go unnoticed, I would join a new gym or try a new workout much more often," compared to just 30% of those who have not been shamed. Furthermore, nearly 4 in 10 (39%) of those who have experienced fitness shaming said after being fitness shamed, they avoided the source of shame. More than half (56%) reported low self-esteem as a lasting effect and 34% reported developing disordered eating or body dysmorphic disorder.

Based on the results of this survey and follow-up interviews, we have developed a seven-phase "cycle of shame" that asserts that external messaging can prompt negative self-talk and emotions. In this section, we will explore each phase of this cycle and bring it to life with quotes from both adults and CEPs.

PHASE 1: "I HEAR SIMPLE MESSAGES."

Simplistic messaging from the fitness industry is pervasive and difficult to ignore, particularly within the context of social media. A thematic analysis of 1,000 #fitspiration posts found that online fitness creators accentuate fitness as a "set of authoritative instructions, rules, or principles" positioned as an individual responsibility that is "effortless and uncomplicated" (5). In our interviews with exercise professionals, many agree that the fitness industry bears some responsibility for promoting shame. Peter, a 35-year-old CEP from Minnesota, told us:

"The fitness industry sells people on guilt and shame. 'If you buy my product, I can make you 10 pounds lighter.' When you sell on these flashy, sexy words, it's not productive. It sounds so attainable, but it isn't simple."

PHASE 2: "I THINK MEETING MY FITNESS GOALS SHOULD BE SIMPLE."

Our clients are inundated with this simple messaging, and it's no wonder that their key takeaway is a belief that meeting their own goals should be easy. Messaging like "Just do it" gives the impression that fitness should be easy for everyone (and if you can't get there, it's your own fault) (5). Christy, a 33-year-old woman from New Jersey, observes:

"There's a lot of marketing that tries to make changing your body sound simple because if it didn't, nobody would try. But they don't take into account different genetics and body types."

PHASE 3: "I'M DOING WHAT I'M TOLD AND FIND IT'S NOT SIMPLE."

When reality sets in, it is often accompanied by frustration that fitness is not as easy as these "flashy, sexy words" make it sound.

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Figure 2. Derailing Fitness Shaming as a CEP. This figure details Accessibility, Communication, and Collaboration as approaches to derailing fitness shame, including actionable steps to bring these approaches to life.

	Mindset and Approach	**Actionable Steps**
Accessibility	In a world where modalities of movement are not universally accessible, 1) consider those people who are not in the "room" 2) investigate why 3) stay curious and ask questions 3) re-design your space	Present options and modifications as different pathways rather than lesser pathways. For example, rather than saying, "Here is option A for those that want a challenge, and here is option B for those that want an easier option," you can say, "Here is option A if you're feeling some super spicy core action, and here is option B if you want something less spicy. Both are awesome options!" Build a culture that values people moving their bodies in different ways.
Communication	Know what you do not know. Underlying chronic conditions (such as high blood pressure, heart disease, or diabetes) warrant tailored fitness advice. Before broadcasting ideas that may be beneficial for some consumers, consider if the advice is relevant to your entire audience. The information you relay may be taken as hard truths by those who see it. Acknowledge the risks of simple, generalized fitness and wellness guidance.	Empower your clients to share what they are feeling and experiencing. Inform them that their appreciation and understanding of their personal fitness journey is the prerequisite for beginning to grow. Remove the idealized images of what health and fitness can look like from your social media. Show your followers what realistic healthy habits look like by leaning into the body's intuition ("The sun would feel great on my skin. I'll go for a walk"), rather than external pressures ("I have to go for a walk today so I'm not lazy"). Refrain from simplified messages that can become diluted as they spread through social media rapidly.
Collaboration	Realize that we go further when we all win together. Your gym or your modality of movement is not the sole pathway for people to get healthy. Promoting it as the "best" way to move can lead to the client basing their worth on your modality.	Introduce other trusted professional voices into your clients' worlds. Statements like, "I don't know what I would do without you!" positions the CEP as the reason for the client's movement progression. Remind your clients that their power comes from within and introduce them to other professionals to diversify their movement portfolio. Show them that you work in tandem with other professionals and specialties, and they can too.

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Stan, a 37-year-old CEP from California, thinks social media trends bear some responsibility:

"There are a lot of trends on social media that people get fooled by… They want to see results, but they jump on these trends and they DON'T see results. Then they get depressed, and it goes back into that cycle where they end up doing what they were doing before. They give up on themselves."

PHASE 4: "I DON'T MEET MY GOALS."

Not surprisingly, the reality that fitness is not simple often hits people hard. Another CEP we interviewed, 33-year-old Heather from Minnesota, agrees that the abundance of online information can be confusing and frustrating to the "average Joe" seeking fitness—and the result of this confusion is often removing oneself from the situation:

"There's a ton of information online, and it confuses people who are not experts in fitness. They're looking for answers and trying to sift through so much information. There are so many options that they feel frozen, exhausted, and confused. Then they burn out and don't do anything."

Erica, a 33-year-old woman from Minnesota, describes having this exact experience:

"*When I really wanted to get results, I would try the Insanity workout and the HIIT workouts and army training. It was crazy. I was like, 'Well, if I want to lose weight, I have to do this.' It wasn't working for me, so it made me avoid working out in general."*

PHASE 5: "I FEEL LIKE A FAILURE AND TURN INWARD."

The link between shame and isolation has been established in previous research (2). This is a key phase in the cycle of shame: after being falsely inspired by messaging that makes fitness sound simple and attainable, people often see their lack of results as a personal shortcoming. The outcome is isolation and giving up. Our survey found that 45% of people who had been fitness shamed named "preference to exercise alone" as an effect of the shaming, and 24% admitted that they quit exercising, either long term or short term, as a result of being shamed. Migdariana, a 34-year-old woman from Connecticut, lamented:

"Working a full-time job every day and coming home with two kids, you only have so much time for yourself. I'll skip the gym, but then by the end of the week I feel so horrible for not going that my motivation goes down."

PHASE 6: "I AM ASHAMED OF MYSELF, AND SOCIETY IS ASHAMED OF ME."

With decreased motivation and increased isolation, the full effect of shame easily sets in. Christy describes this self-flagellation and her ultimate realization that her shame was feeding on itself to make her feel worse.

"I spent so much time when I was younger internalizing shame. 'It's my fault. I'm not good enough or strong enough.' Ultimately, internalizing the shame doesn't lead to results. It just leads to poor mental health outcomes."

PHASE 7: "I'M DESPERATE FOR AN EASY SOLUTION."

After experiencing this cycle of belief (that fitness will be simple), disappointment (when it's not), isolation, and shame, people are left more scarred, and no more fit, than they were at the beginning of the cycle. This is the point where the widespread simple messaging can kick in again to start the cycle over. CEP Heather observes:

"That feeling of desperation and shame carries so much weight. It feels so heavy. And then the people putting out those simple messages are preying on that feeling."

CEPs and the Cycle of Shame

Many of the CEPs we heard from recognize that this cycle of shame exists and that it can have serious, detrimental effects on people. CEP Heather laments:

"The public is taking online messaging meant for small or able-bodied people and trying to apply it to themselves, even if they have a different experience. That can be harmful physically, emotionally, and mentally."

Our data show that it isn't just "the public" who are impacted by fitness shaming. For exercise professionals (28% of whom report having experienced fitness shaming), being fitness shamed can impact their work in different ways. On the one hand, we found that CEPs who have been fitness shamed themselves are significantly more likely than those who have not to operate with guilt and shame as cornerstones of fitness, indicating that the expression "hurt people hurt people" also may apply to fitness

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shaming. Previously shamed CEPs are significantly more likely to make clients feel guilty when they can't manage to exercise (61% vs. 48%). At the same time, CEPs who have been fitness shamed are more likely than those who have not to say that sharing personal anecdotes from their own fitness journey are a part of their interactions with clients (41% vs. 29%), leading us to believe that the experience of being shamed may, for some, actually lead to greater willingness to display vulnerability and therefore deepen the connection with their clients.

The Solution: Derailing the Cycle of Shame

We propose that exercise professionals, being on the "front lines" of this phenomenon through direct and consistent client interaction, are uniquely poised to see clients in real-time phases of the cycle of shame. This section will lay out ideas that exercise professionals can employ to reduce fitness shaming (Figure 2). Much like a fitness journey, derailing this shame is complex; our hope is that this research inspires exercise professionals to begin to take steps in this direction.

1 – Accessibility: Foster Welcoming and Accessible Spaces First

Currently, only 38% of CEPs completely agree that their classes are a welcoming space for people of all body types. When asked what would be most impactful in reducing shaming, nearly half (47%) of CEPs said making exercising more accessible, while 36% said reframing what constitutes a workout. Heather, a professional trainer details how she promotes accessibility in her work:

"Reducing fitness shaming starts from a place of acknowledging that every person and every body has inherent worth, as they exist in this moment. We must tell our clients that they are the experts in their bodies and we're here to guide and support, but not enforce our opinions on what you should be doing. I approach my clients telling them that they have complete agency, autonomy, and ownership over their bodies in our sessions. When I teach group classes, we're not doing triceps to get rid of 'flabby arm wings.' We're doing triceps to be able to hold your grandchild."

Quite often the people who are in our space are the people who we are creating space for. Look at your clients and take note of who is in the room— and who is *not* in the room. What kinds of people are absent in your fitness space? Are there certain ages, genders, incomes, or abilities missing? Then investigate *why* those people may not be in the room. The more people can show up in fitness spaces as their full selves, the more they can thrive. Consider redesigning your accessibility model by asking clients directly *what they want and need* to feel safe moving their bodies. For example, providing an intake form that asks the client to consider why they are here, both physically and emotionally. Encourage them to consider their own desired outcomes: What do they want to do? How do they want to feel both while they are in, and after they leave, the space? This intake form also can include important accessibility questions framed by the five senses. Do they have any hearing or sight needs? Do they have strong affinities for or aversions to certain smells? Do they prefer light touch and adjustments, just high fives, or no physical contact? Give them the space to tell you things that are important to know about them: injuries, favorite activities, daily routines. Opening the space to have these discussions is crucial to gaining a baseline understanding of how accessible, or not, the space you curate is.

2 – Communication: Leverage Your Influence Responsibly, Both Online and Offline

As leaders in the movement space, one of the most important things we can say is, "I don't know." Knowing what you don't know, and speaking the truth about what you *do know*, makes you a trusted and reputable voice in a world of oversimplified, and often confusing, information. By communicating authentically from our knowledge base, we can give our clients the tools to leverage health and wellness information to serve their own, unique realities and start to derail the cycle of shame. This holds true both online and offline.

User-generated health and fitness content on social media can create "a fiction of external perfectionism," fueling the idea that optimal fitness is measured "exclusively by visual appearance," rather than physical performance (6). Copious amounts of research find that "Fitspiration" (seen through hashtags such as #fitspiration, #fitspo, etc.) can have detrimental effects on self-image and furthermore, may ultimately discourage exercise and movement (7). Despite this, we cannot ignore the immense potential for social media platforms as a widely available and popular tool to help derail shaming.

In the study we conducted, nearly half of CEPs say their clients follow them on social media. The CEPs think their fitness-related posts are much better received than they actually are: 79% of CEPs say that social media has been helpful with their clients' well-being goals, whereas only 24% of social media users agree. This presents a prime opportunity for CEPs to leverage social media to build stronger connections with their clients and to derail shaming. As Christy, who follows the Health at Every Size movement, defined as a weight-neutral approach to health and fitness (8), explains:

"It's very important for me to see bodies like mine in the fitness space. I've curated my algorithm intensely so any fitness professional who talks about weight loss is blocked. My page is full of plus-size influencers in the fitness space."

3 – Collaboration: Join Forces with Other Professionals

Connecting and collaborating with other professionals creates spaces where influential people come together to build a narrative of nonjudgmental, empathetic support. To combat the isolation of fitness shaming, we recommend deep collaboration with other exercise professionals to build environments centered around self-care, self-love, and self-acceptance. Consumers are invited into the dialogue for change when CEPs and fitness institutions publicly denounce fitness shaming. The internal voice of doubt saying, "I'm not enough" becomes quieter when intertwined groups of professionals shout, "Yes you are!" As Peter details:

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"It's been great to grow my own circle of CEPs to create a community where we grow together. I partner with physical therapists, gym owners, movement specialists, and others to make a big web of networks that individuals can call on."

We suggest considering the following questions: Do your clients understand that there isn't a right or wrong way to build their portfolio of movement? Do your clients know that if they work with another CEP, you won't hold it against them? Do your clients acknowledge that you, the CEP, are not the key to their success? When clients are encouraged to form relationships with not just one CEP but an entire network of professionals, they realize the capacity for healthy movement lies within themselves.

CONCLUSION

Fitness shaming is widespread, and people who experience it carry lasting impacts that affect how they perceive their bodies and their sense of self. By looking inward and examining the impacts of our well-intentioned work, exercise professionals can recognize our roles both in perpetuating and obliterating fitness shaming. As a profession, we have the unique capacity to collectively shift systems in service of derailing the cycle of shame.

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Yet the pathway forward cannot be laid with an oversimplified action plan. Knowing that people carry the weight of the cycle of shame on their shoulders, we may not be able to stop it completely. But, with a foundational understanding of its presence, we can acknowledge it and move forward compassionately. Shame becomes less powerful when it is brought into the light and before it sends us into isolation. With respect for exercise professionals and a strong desire to ignite change, we hope this article has provided a jumping-off point; it is up to us to forge the path ahead.

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BRIDGING THE GAP

There is a cycle of fitness shaming that is pervasive and has serious impacts on both people who have been shamed and the exercise professionals who work with them. Effects of shaming include low self-esteem, preference to exercise alone, and avoiding the source of shame. Exercise professionals are uniquely poised to help derail the cycle of shame through accessibility, communication, and collaboration.

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